Overcoming the Fear of Death

By Thich Nhat Hanh

My dear friends,
Today is the twenty-eighth of July 1997 and we are in the Upper Hamlet. I remember in the old time, about ten years ago, there was a little boy who came to Plum Village to practice. He spent one day in Plum Village and then two days in Plum Village and then he liked it. There were a lot of children practicing and playing with him. So during a tea meditation, rather lemonade meditation, he said "Everything is wonderful here except one thing—there is no television." But he survived. Survived and then he continued and stayed several weeks in Plum Village. One of his conclusions before leaving Plum Village: that it is possible to survive without television. You can have many kinds of joy and you can nourish yourself with these joys. You don't need television. I am not against television. There are many wonderful programs. I only call for attention because there are many programs of television that are not very healthy to us. They bring us so many toxins.

There was another boy who arrived in Plum Village and he found it too quiet. Many hundred people staying here and yet too quiet and he wanted to leave right away. I think his parents had negotiated with him that if he would stay in Plum Village for one week, then they would bring him to the seashore for two weeks. He thought that was a good deal—one week in Plum Village and then two weeks at the beach. But when he arrived in Plum Village, he found it so calm that he didn't like it at all. He hated it and he wanted to go right away. He was very strong, very determined and his parents were in despair because his parents loved Plum Village and they wanted very much to practice in Plum Village. So they were about to give up and leave Plum Village with their child. Suddenly Sister Chang Khong appeared and she said, "Okay, you can leave, but stay just for one hour." Then she brought a few children to come and play with him and he liked it and he accepts to stay for one day. He was a special person to be taken care of, so other children were asked to take care of him. He got the attention of other young people and he liked it. He found that the children here are very nice—kind to him. So he accepted to stay for another day and then he extended it to several days. The young man liked it and he agreed to stay for one whole week.

At the end of the week, he proposed to his parents to stay on. He didn't want to go to the beach anymore. He wanted to stay in Plum Village for two more weeks.

I think it is possible to be happy without watching television a lot. Again, I want to say that I am not against television, because we can profit a lot from television. But we should have an intelligent policy. I think that the family should get together and discuss how to use the television. Everyone has to be present and we should agree on what kind of programs we should view and what kind of programs we should not view. I think we should have a TV magazine to find out what we can see and what we should not see.

I know a family in Boston. They selected the programs of television very carefully. If they see in the program a very good film, they agree that everyone should be present to view the film together. Grandma, Daddy, Mommy, everyone wears their best dress and goes to the living room and sit very comfortably and watches television, like going to the cinema, it's like a ritual. Imagine, Grandma puts on her best dress and wants all her grandchildren to come and sit close to her. She is very happy. Watching that film alone would not make her as happy as watching together with the whole family.

In our modern times, the family does not have a lot of chance to be together. Sometimes people eat at different times. That is a pity. We should arrange so that we eat together as a family at least once a day. Is that too much—once a day? We should practice walking meditation, together the whole family, at least once a week. If you live near the beach or the bank of the river, or a woods, it would be wonderful if the whole family could organize a walking meditation together for thirty or forty-five minutes. That is my wish. We can bring some of the things that we practice at Plum Village home, like together doing a session of total relaxation in the living room. Everyone has to learn how to conduct such a session. Even if you are still very young, you can conduct a session of total relaxation. As you know, for sitting meditation, you don't have to sit a lot. You sit for a number of breaths only breathing in, breathing out. You may like to use pebble meditations. Adults can also practice pebble meditations with their children. So I rely, I trust, that you use your intelligence to organize the practice at home. We count on you very much.

When I was in Italy a few months ago, I gave a retreat where there were many children. There was a little girl who had a little sister and hated her. One day she told her parents, "Why don't we kill her?" She meant her younger sister. Because people are inclined to eliminate the things they don't like. We live in a technological world. There are many quick ways to eliminate what we don't

want. A sister wants to kill her younger sister because she does not get along with her, she was so demanding. It upsets me a lot when I hear the story.

I think in television you watch programs like Power Rangers. In that series, Power Rangers, you have the power to destroy everything that you don't like, and of course there are many things that we don't like around us. There was a little girl who pointed a toy gun at her mother and said, "I want to shoot you down." When we have something wrong within our body, we have the tendency to open our body, cut it, and throw it out. We call it surgery. We want to do it quickly. We don't know that there are many other ways. We don't know how to embrace the block of pain in us, to take care of it, so that it can be transformed. We only think of throwing away, eliminating with guns, with knives, scissors, and things like that. What a civilization we have. Therefore we have to think deeply about this and watching television can increase our bad tendency of wanting to eliminate whatever we don't want.

Television can increase your craving, your fantasy, and it does not help you to understand the hardships, the difficulties, of your parents and so on. Many programs can increase your violence, your anger, your wish to eliminate whatever you don't like. Your inability to embrace, to forbear, to help. That is why we need to look deeply. I urge that the whole family get together and have a deep discussion on this. After five days of retreat, the girl was transformed deeply because we especially took care of her. With the whole Sangha and the Sangha of young people, we had a very good program for young people at that retreat. When she got back to school she wrote a story about David and Angelina that got her a very high note from the teacher. That evening when her baby sister cried instead of kicking her or beating her, she said, "Be quiet. I am here for you my sister." She practiced the second mantra, by herself, alone. I can see in that little girl there are so many good seeds, but because of watching so many bad television programs, the good seeds had not been able to manifest. These programs only water the bad seeds in her. Going into a retreat where the setting is quite different, she was able to practice some quiet breathing, walking, surrounded by people who are calm. All these things have helped touch the good seeds within the child. Five days, only five days, helped her to transform and she became a very lovely sister.

So I am not pessimistic. I know the good seeds are in every one of us. If we have the opportunity to take care of the young people, they grow up beautifully. Mindfulness helps us to look more deeply and to reorganize our daily life. We should not allow ourselves and our children to get intoxicated every day. This is the true practice, the concrete practice, of the five mindfulness trainings and the children can very well practice it. If the adults practice, the children will follow.

One lady in England told me that during more than ten years she had the habit of taking two glasses of wine and nothing bad has happened to her. She said that she cannot take the fifth mindfulness training because she does not want to abandon her two glasses of wine, which are so good. She used many pretexts: "You know, Thay, wine is part of our civilization?" and so on. She talked a lot. She was trying to defend herself a lot. I was sitting very quietly and I did not say anything. I saw that she was very tempted to take all five mindfulness trainings. She was struggling till the last minute. Finally, I said, I know you are going to take all the five mindfulness trainings tomorrow. You say no tonight, but tomorrow you will do so. Because I know that you know very well that you are taking the five mindfulness trainings not only for yourself, but for your children. Because two glasses of wine have done no harm to you, but who knows what happens with your children. Maybe two glasses of wine can make one of your children become an alcoholic person, because your children are not exactly like you. So if you refrain from these two glasses of wine, the children will look up to you and they will naturally refrain from drinking wine.

I know children who smoke. That is because the parents smoke. So let us think like this: we practice not only for ourselves, but for our ancestors, and for our children. We practice as a *bodhisattva* for the sake of everyone; for our society, also. The next morning she took all five precepts.

So let us make a vow, make a determination, to live in such a way that can help so many people. Because when we've got that determination, there is a strong source of energy born in us and that energy will protect us from doing things that are wrong. That source of energy in Buddhism, we call *bodhicitta*, the mind of love, the mind of awakening. It makes you alive, and children, also. They can have a strong mind of love, mind of understanding. I have seen many young people support their parents and help their parents to come back to the practice. So I have faith. I wish today you will discuss a little bit on this. Your insight about the question I proposed five, six days ago was very good, wonderful.

An unhappy person, to make other people happy, to love other people, has to take care of and love himself or herself first. In Plum Village, we offer him, we offer her, the way to breathe, to walk, to stop, to embrace the feeling of pain, of sorrow. Because when you know how to take care of yourself, when you know how to love yourself, then you know how to take care and to love other people. The Buddha said that taking care of yourself, loving oneself, is the basic thing, is the basic condition, for you to take care and to love all living beings. Of course, other people can help you practice, but you have to make efforts by yourself. Peace, happiness, and joy begin with myself and then I will get the support of

other people around me. Then, later, I will be a source of support to other people around me.

[Young people] When you hear the bell, please stand up and bow.

[Bell]

Yesterday, we talked a little bit about non-fear. The Buddha knows that there is fear in each one of us. That is why he urges us to touch our fear, to embrace it. Our fear of loneliness, our fear of being abandoned, our fear of growing old, our fear of dying, our fear of being sick, and so on. You have learned that every time we embrace our fear, it will lose some of its strength; otherwise, the blocks of fear will continue to be strong in the depths of our consciousness and continue to shape our behavior.

Non-fear is the true base for true happiness. We have been learning about *Dana*, giving, generosity, and non-fear is the kind of gift that is considered to be the best, the most precious. If you can offer non-fear to someone, you offer the best kind of gift. The people who are dying may be very fearful. If you have non-fear with you, you sit with him or with her in that difficult moment of his life. You make him die peacefully without fear. This is a great gift. If you are someone who learns how to accompany the dying person, you have to cultivate your non-fear. Because without non-fear, you cannot be your best in order to help him, or help her.

There are three kinds of gifts spoken about in Buddhism. The first gift is piety. It means material gift. You give that in order to relieve the suffering of the people who are poor, who are destitute concerning the problem of housing, of food, of medicine.

The second kind of gift is the Dharma. With the Dharma, you can help people to relieve a lot of their suffering. You help people to know how to organize their lives, to do things in such a way that they can bring happiness to themselves and to their families, how to transform their suffering, how to love, and to help other people stop suffering.

Finally, the third kind of gift is called non-fear. I would like to tell you the story of a person who lived two thousand six hundred years ago, who was a lay disciple of the Buddha and who practiced giving, generosity, in such a way that he got a lot of happiness. Finally he got himself the gift of non-fear when he died because he died beautifully, peacefully, and his name is Anathapindika.

Anathapindika is one of the early lay disciples of the Buddha. Anathapindika is not his real name. His real name is Sudatta. Anathapindika is the name given to him by the people of his city because he was so generous. He was a businessman. But he wasn't so busy. He had time and energy to bring help to destitute people, the people who are alone. He used a part of his wealth to do the work of giving. It did not seem that he became less rich at all while doing so. He had a lot of friends in the business circle and he was loved by them, quite a lot. He did business with these people and got their trust and continued to help the people in his country a lot.

The first time he saw the Buddha was in the Venuvana. Venuvana means the bamboo grove in the kingdom of Magadha. He had a brother-in law living in that city, the city of Rajagaha in the Magadha kingdom. He used to come to that city several times a year to do business. He himself lived in the kingdom of Kosala, north of the Ganges River. He had a family there. The capitol of Kosala is Sravasti. So from time to time, he left Sravasti in order to go to Rajagaha. When he was there, he always stayed at his brother-in-law's home.

One day he arrived and it didn't seem that his brother-in-law took good care of him at all, not like other times. His brother-in-law was busy arranging the house as if he was about to invite the king. So he asked the question, "Dear brother, why didn't you take care of me like the other times? What are you doing? Are you inviting the king to the house or something?" And his brother-in-law said, "No, I am not inviting the king. I am inviting the Buddha." He had never heard of the Buddha. The Buddha is just a monk and some of his students.

It was the third year after his enlightenment and the Buddha was teaching in the Bamboo Grove. The Bamboo Grove had been given to him by the king of Magadha, King Bimbisara. There were more than a thousand monks already. Every time I thought of that moment of the career of the Buddha, I always felt a little bit of pity for the Buddha, because to have one thousand two hundred and fifty monks to take care of, that is big business. I am taking care of less than one hundred monks and nuns now, and I know that is not easy.

Sangha building: without big brothers, talented monks like Shariputra, Mollegana, the Buddha couldn't have been able to build a Sangha of monks and nuns like he did. It is difficult. Sangha building is what every one of us has to learn. To build a happy Sangha is for our support, our happiness. Your family is a Sangha, itself. Building a Sangha of practice is to build your own safety, your support, your happiness.

When Anathapindika heard the word "Buddha," he was struck, because he never heard such a name. It’s a new name. "The Buddha, you mean?" "Yes, the Buddha." "It means the awakened one?" "Yes, it means the awakened one." So suddenly he felt in love with that name, that person. I don't know why. Things happen like that. You hear a name and suddenly you have a lot of sympathy. As if everything had been written before in your heart. And that word Buddha did not leave him?. He wanted to wait until tomorrow to see the Buddha and a number of disciples coming, but he couldn't wait. He had a hard time going to sleep at night. He woke up three or four times during the night thinking that it was already sunrise. Finally, he thought that the sun is rising. They did not have any clock then. He set out and said, “I am going to welcome the Buddha. Maybe I will see him on the street, because I know the way to Venuvana.”

This year, a number of us from Plum Village, we sat in Venuvana for lunch with the Indian children just a few months ago. But it was not really the morning. He went alone and he continue to walk until he arrive at Venuvana. It was still very early in the morning. All the monks were still sleeping and it was dark in the bamboo grove. He sat down and suddenly he saw in the fog someone coming, although he did not see very clearly. Finally, he realized that this person may be the Buddha. So they had a few sentences in exchange and he was so happy to meet the Buddha and he recognized in the Buddha his real teacher. So they sat down for a conversation, about a half an hour only, and they love each other. He invited the Buddha to come to his kingdom for a teaching, the kingdom of Kosala.

That day, the Buddha went to the house of his brother-in law. After having lunch, he gave a Dharma discourse and that helped Anathapindika to learn more about the teachings of the Buddha. He was determined to invite the Buddha to come to his country to teach. The next day, toward the end of the day, he asked his brother-in-law to allow him to use his house to make an offering to the Buddha again. He wanted the Buddha to come the next day. After having visited the Buddha a few times, he got the agreement of the Buddha that the Buddha would go to the kingdom of Kosala, the city of Sravasti, to bring the teaching there.

He was so happy. He asked one of the monks to go with him to make the preparation. Shariputra, one of the high monks in the order, agreed to go with him. They set out on foot to go to the kingdom of Kosala. On the way, they spread the news that the Buddha, a great teacher, is coming and you have to prepare yourself in order to welcome him. When they got back to the city of Sravasti, he looked hard to find a piece of land, because he wanted to keep the Buddha in his country. The Buddha is such a jewel. The Buddha may come and

teach and may go back to Venuvana, and he wanted the Buddha to stay longer, much longer, in his kingdom.

He was looking very hard for a beautiful place. Finally he found a place, a beautiful park, very close to the city. He found out that the park belonged to Prince Jeta. He visited the prince and asked the prince to sell it to him in order for him to offer it to the Buddha and his congregation. Jeta said, "Well, this park is my pleasure. The king has given it to me and I want to keep it for my own pleasure." Anathapindika talks about the Buddha. "If you consent to sell it to me, then I will make it into a beautiful practice center for the Buddha and his monks." And he insisted. Prince Jeta in order to dissuade him said, "Well, if you have enough gold to cover the ground of the park, then I will sell it to you. Anathapindika thought for one or two minutes and said, "Yes, I will do that. I will have enough gold to cover the park and I will buy it." And then the prince said, "That is a joke. That is a joke. I don't want to sell." But Anathapindika said, "Your excellency, you know that you are the crown prince and anything a person like you says should not be a joke. You have said so and I have agreed." He went and sought advice of a lawyer. Then the lawyer advised Jeta, the prince, to sell it to him because he had made a declaration as a joke.

So finally Anathapindika brought a cart of gold to come and cover the place. They so impressed Prince Jena. "Who is the Buddha that this person agreed to spend all of his fortune to buy a piece of land for him?" He was so impressed that when the gold was spread about two thirds of the ground he said, "Well, I offer the third part. You don't have to bring any more gold. And I also offer all the trees in the park." That is why nowadays we call it the Anathapindika Park with the Jeta Trees.

Then quickly, he built the monastery. Very quickly, because he had found the object of his true love. He spent a lot of time, energy building the practice center for the Buddha and his monks. Anathapindika took a lot of pleasure serving the Buddha, serving the Sangha. His family did not know anything about Buddhism. They had to learn a lot from other teachers. But this time, they were very united as a family. He had three daughters and one son. He also had a young brother named Subbutti. Subbutti later became a very illustrious monk. You learn about him in the *Diamond Sutra*. Subutti, the one who practice the deep vision on emptiness.

They came to listen to the Dharma talk given by the Buddha at the Jeta Grove every week. The Jeta Grove became a very beautiful and famous practice center. The King of Kosala also came and listened and became a student and a very good friend of the Buddha. The King of Kosala was born in the same year as the

Buddha. After he had become a student of the Buddha, he continued to learn and to practice. Finally they became very good, very close friends. You know that the Buddha died at the age of eighty. King Pasenadi of Kosala also died just a few months before the Buddha.

The third daughter of Anathapindika learned Buddhism very well. She practiced very well. She was wedded to a governor of a nearby country called Anga. The daughter introduced the governor to the teaching of the Buddha and he became a very good supporter of the Buddha Dharma, also. Anathpindika's family was a very happy family, and their happiness came from the joy of supporting the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. They were very united with each other.

One day the Buddha learned that Anathapindika was very sick. That was about thirty years later. He went to visit Anathapindika. His beloved lay disciples. Anathapindika said that he has only one thing that he is sorry about. He is very satisfied with his life, his family, his practice. He is only sorry about one thing: that he is too weak to come to the Jena Grove every week to listen to the Dharma talk. He wanted to be there at every Dharma talk of the Buddha. The Buddha said, "I will send my disciples to you, my disciples are me, to take care of you and help you to practice even if you cannot come to the Jena Grove." Venerable Shariputra was also a very close friend of Anathapindika. He used to come visit him very often and help him. One morning Shariputra learned that Anathapindika was dying. He thought that maybe this would be his last visit and he asked his younger brother in the Dharma, Ánanda, to come along.

When they arrive, Anathapindika could not sit up in his bed. Shariputra said, "No my friend, don't try. Just lay down quietly. We will bring a few chairs close to you and we will be together." The first question he asked is "Dear friend, Anathapindika, how do you feel? Is the pain in your body increasing or has it begun to decrease?" Anathapindika said, "No, Venerables, the pain in me is not decreasing. It is increasing all the time." There upon, Shariputra proposed that three of them practice together the practice of the recollections of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Shariputra is one of the most intelligent disciples of the Buddha. He knew that Anathapindika received a lot of pleasure every time he served the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. He wanted to water the seeds of happiness in the store consciousness of Anathapindika.

He began to invite Ánanda and Anathapindika to breathe in and breathe out and focus their attention on the person of the Buddha, on the virtues of the Buddha. After that, they meditated on the Dharma, the Dharma that can bring relief right away. The moment you begin to practice you get calm, you get transformation right away. If you don't know how to practice mindful breathing, you cannot get

the calm and the well-being, but if you know how to practice mindful breathing, mindful walking, you begin to get some calm, some stability right away. The Dharma is something that does not require time, a lot of time. You can touch the Dharma. You can touch the effect of your practice right in this life, right today. The Sangha is a body of practitioners who are always there for you, supporting you every moment. Especially when you need her, the Sangha is for you. So after the practice of the recollection on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, Anathapindika restored the balance. He suffered much less and he was able to smile.

At that time, Shariputra proposed that they continue the practice. They practiced about looking deeply into their six sense organs, the objects of these six senses, and also the consciousnesses that arise from the contact between the six organs and the objects.

In *The Chanting Book of Plum Village*—this is an old version, the new version has been printed in America and will be available in a few months—there is a discourse called *The Teachings to be Given to the Sick*. I would like to invite you to study this discourse. I translated the sutra from the Chinese, but I also consulted an equivalent text in the Pali canon.

Let us practice like this. Breathing in, I know that this body is not me. Breathing out, I feel I am not caught in this body. In fact, they begin with eyes. These eyes are not me. I am not caught by these eyes. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—six things. They always begin with eyes. Breathing in, I know that these eyes are not me. I am not caught in these eyes. I am life without boundaries. These eyes have a beginning. These eyes can disintegrate, but I am not caught in these eyes. They begin with the eyes and continue with the nose, the ears, the tongue, the body, and the mind.

Then they switch to the objects of the six senses. These forms are not me. I am not caught in these forms. These sounds are not me. I am not caught in these sounds. Because the dying person may be attached to forms, sounds, body, mind, et cetera, considering these things to be self, considering that they are losing these, they are losing self.

After having meditated on the six senses and their objects and the six kinds of consciousnesses, they begin to meditate on the four elements. Breathing in, I know the element water is in me. Breathing out, I know that the element water is not me. I am not caught in the element of water. When you breathe and you meditate like that, you see that the water is everywhere, around you, inside of

you. Water is not you. You are more than water. You are not caught by the element of water.

And you meditate also on the element of heat. The heat in me is not me. I am not caught by the heat in me. The heat is everywhere. You do not consider the heat to be yourself. Breathing in I realize the element of earth in me. Breathing out, I know that I am not the earth. The element earth is not me and I am not caught in the element called earth. So they continue like that with the elements air, with the four elements.

And they come to the five aggregates we have learned in the last few days: form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Breathing in, I know that form is not me. I am not limited by form. Feelings are not me. I am not limited by feelings. Perceptions are not me. I am not caught by the perceptions. Mental formations are not me. I am not these mental formations. Consciousness is not me. I am not caught by this consciousness. Then they practice looking into the nature of causes and conditions?

Anathapindika was practicing because he knows the two monks very well. They are both beloved disciples of the Buddha and are sitting there to support him so he could do the meditation easily. First of all, he meditated in order to restore the balance in him so that the pain in him would not bother him too much. And finally he was concentrated enough in order to follow the other kind of meditation. “Friend Anathapindika, everything that is arises because of causes and conditions. Everything that is has the nature not to be born and not to die, not to arrive and not to depart.” These are very deep teachings. When the body arises, it arises. It does not come from anywhere. If conditions are sufficient, the body manifests itself and you perceive it as existing. When the conditions are no longer sufficient, the body is not perceived by you and you may think of it as not existing. In fact, the nature of everything is the nature of no-birth and no-death. Shariputra was giving the best teaching of the Buddha to Anathapindika in this very critical moment of his life. Everything that is comes to be because of a combination of causes. When the causes and conditions are sufficient, the body is present. When the causes and conditions are not sufficient, the body is absent. The same is true with ears, nose, eyes, tongue, and mind; form, sound, smell, taste, touch and so on.

These lines may be a little bit abstract to you, but it is possible for all of us to get a deep understanding, a deep experience of it. You have to know the true nature of death, the true nature of dying, in order to understand really the true nature of living. If you don't understand what is death, you don't understand what is life, also. Therefore, it is very important to know the nature of birth and death. The

teaching of the Buddha is to relieve us of suffering and the base of suffering is ignorance, ignorance about the true nature of yourself, of things around you. Since you don't understand, you are too afraid and fear has brought you a lot of suffering. That is why the offering of non-fear is the best kind of offering you can make to someone.

[Bell]

We have ideas. We talk about it ,but we may not have a real understanding of the words we use, the ideas we have. In our mind, to die means from some one you suddenly become no one. You cease to be. You cease to exist. That is our understanding. In the same way, we think of birth as our beginning. What does it mean to be born? To be born means from nothing, you suddenly become something. From no one, you suddenly become someone. That is our definition of birth and death. Because of these notions, we have kept our fear in us for too long. The Buddha invites us to bring our fear up and look deeply into the object of our fear: fear of dying, fear of non-being. That is the cream of the Buddha's teaching. You cannot afford not to learn it because this is the best thing in the teaching of the Buddha.

There are many non-Buddhists who have discovered the reality of no-birth and no-death. Let us talk about, for instance, the French scientist Lavoisier. He looked deeply into the nature of things and he declared that nothing is born and nothing can die: "*Rien ne se crée, rien ne se perd*." I don't think that he had studied Buddhist sutras.

Suppose we tried to practice with a sheet of paper because a sheet of paper is what we call a thing. Let us practice together like Anathapindika, Shariputra, and Ánanda, looking deeply into this sheet of paper. You may think that the sheet of paper has a birthday and will have a day of dying. We may imagine a day when the piece of paper is produced from nothing; it suddenly becomes something, a sheet of paper. Is it possible? When you look into the sheet of paper in this very moment, you don't have to go back to someday. Just look at it in the present moment. Into the true nature of the paper you see what? You see that the piece of paper is made of non-paper elements. This is a very scientific way of looking, because you don't accept anything that is not evident.

When I touch the sheet of paper, I touch the tree, the forest, because I know that deep inside there is the existence of the trees, the forest. If you return the element tree back to the forest, the sheet of paper cannot be here. Right? I also touch the sunshine. Even at midnight touching the sheet of paper, I touch sunshine. Because sunshine is one element called non-paper elements that has made up the

paper. Because without sunshine, no tree can grow. So touching the tree, I touch the sunshine.

I touch the cloud. There is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. You don't have to be a poet to see the cloud in a sheet of paper. Because without a cloud, there would be no rain and no forest can grow. So the cloud is in there. The trees are in there. The sunshine, the minerals from the earth, the earth, time, space, people, insects—everything in the cosmos seem to be existing in this sheet of paper. If you look deeply, you find that everything in the cosmos is present in this moment in the sheet of paper. If you send one of these elements back to its source, the paper would not be there. That is why it is very important to see that a sheet of paper is made of, only of, non-paper elements. Our body is like that also.

So is it possible to say that from nothing, something has come into existence? From nothing, can you have something? No. Because before we perceive it as a sheet of paper, it had been sunshine. It had been trees. It had been clouds. The paper hasn't come from nothing: *Rien ne se crée.* Nothing has been created. The day you believe to be the birthday of the sheet of paper is something we call a continuation day. Before that day, it had been something else, many things even, and on that day it was perceived as a sheet of paper. So the next time, when you celebrate your birthday, instead of singing happy birthday, you sing happy continuation day. We have done that to a number of friends. Happy continuation day.

The true nature of this sheet of paper, is the nature of no-birth: *Rien ne se crée, rien ne se perd*. Our true nature is also the nature of no-birth. Our birth certificate is misleading. It was certified that we were born on that day from such and such hospital or city. We accepted to begin to be on that day, but we know very well that we had been there in the womb of our mother long before that. From nothing, how can you become something? From no one, how can you become someone? Even before the day of your conception in your mother, you had been there. In your father, in your mother, and everywhere else, also. So if you try to go back, you cannot find a beginning of you. You have been there for a long time and everywhere.

People think they can eliminate what they don't want: they can burn they can kill. But it's not by destroying that they can reduce something to nothing. They killed Mahatma Gandhi. They shot Martin Luther King. But these people continue to be among us in many forms and their being continues. Their spirit continues.

Let us now try to eliminate this sheet of paper. Let us try to burn it to see whether we are capable of making it into nothing. Anyone has a match? I have the element water, but I don't have the element fire, so I am calling for the element fire. Please follow your breathing. Observe to see if it is possible to reduce something to nothing.

Ash is what you can see. If you have observed, you see that some smoke has come up and that is a continuation of the sheet of paper. Now the sheet of paper has become part of a cloud in the sky. You may meet it again tomorrow in the form of a raindrop on your forehead. But maybe you will not be mindful and you will not know that this is a meeting. You may think that the raindrop is foreign to you, but it may just be the sheet of paper into which you have practiced looking deeply. The way it is now, is it nothing? No, I don't think the sheet of paper has become nothing. Part of it has become the cloud. You can say, "Goodbye, see you again one day in one form or another."

It is very difficult to follow the path of a sheet of paper. It is as difficult as to find God. Some heat has penetrated into my body. I almost burned my fingers. It has penetrated into your body, also. It has gone very far. If you have fine equipment you could measure the impact of the heat even from a distant star. Because the impact of a small thing on the whole cosmos can be measured. It has produced some change in my organism, in your organism, and in the cosmos, also. The sheet of paper continues to be there, present. It is difficult for our conceptual eyes to see and discern but we know that it is always there and everywhere, also. And this little amount of ash may be returned to the earth later on. Maybe next year when you come back to Plum Village, you will see it in the form of a little flower or part of a plum leaf. We don't know. But we do know that nothing died. Nothing has become nothingness. So the true nature of the sheet of paper is no-death.

Looking deeply into our self, our body, our feelings, our perceptions. Looking into the mountains, the rivers, to another person, we have to be able to see, to touch the nature of no-birth and no-self in them. This is one of the practices that are very important in the Buddhist tradition.

In the teaching, you may distinguish two dimensions of reality. The first dimension is called historical dimension and the second dimension is called ultimate dimension. We should be able to touch both dimensions if we have enough concentration and mindfulness. Mindfulness and concentration cultivated by our daily practice must be used to look deeply into the nature of what is there.

When we look into the ocean, we can see the waves, different kinds of waves. Some are very big; some are very small. It seems that each wave has its private existence, its birth and its death. A wave can have a lot of complexes. I am smaller than you. I am less important than you. You are more beautiful than me. My life is short. I will no longer be here in a few minutes, a few seconds, and things like that. Ideas like beginning, end, high, low, more beautiful, less beautiful, being here, not being here, all these ideas are assaulting the wave all the time. It cannot live its life as a wave in a peaceful happy way. We are very much the same. We are assailed by so many ideas including the ideas of birth and death, the idea of being and non-being, and we are scared. We get scared. Because of that fear, true happiness is not possible. So deep looking helps us to remove the fear.

According to the teachings, everything that is there is of the nature of no-birth and no-death. When conditions are sufficient, they appear to you. You have a perception of it and you say "This is." When one of the conditions is not there and you cannot perceive it, you say "It is not there." That is non-being. You are caught by the idea of being and non-being. When you see it differently, when you see it for the first time in a form that you have not seen before, you think that it has been born. When you don't recognize it anymore, you cannot have the same kind of perception, you say that "It has died." That is why we have to learn to look deeply in order to touch the realm of no ideas, no perceptions.

In Buddhism, there is a word that upsets many people. That is *nirvana*. Nirvana means extinction. Touching nirvana is the purpose of our practice. But a good question may be asked: extinction of what? It is like the word emptiness. The word emptiness is also very scary because it can provoke the feeling of non-being. Annihilation. Nothingness. We have to learn what words like nirvana or emptiness really mean. One of the best ways is to ask questions. “Dear Buddha, what do you mean? Emptiness? Empty of what? What do we mean by extinction? Extinction of what?”

Extinction first means extinction of ideas, like ideas of birth and death, being and non-being. When you practice looking deeply into the nature of a wave, you have a chance to find out that a wave is made of water. While this is a wave, it is at the same time water. It is possible for a wave to live its life as a wave, and to live its life as the life of water at the same time. This is important. As a wave, she thinks that she has a beginning and an end, high, low, being, and non-being. She thinks that before this, non-being, and after this, non-being. And this is her life span and she is a separate entity. If we look deeply, we see that this wave is made of all the other waves. If we study deeply, we see that the movements of all other waves have combined to make this wave possible. In this wave, you can

touch all the other waves. It 's like when you touch the sheet of paper, you touch all the other non-paper elements in it. So what the wave would call itself is really made of non-self elements. So the idea of a self is an idea to be removed in order for you to touch reality. The self is made of non-self elements. The moment when you realize that, you lose all your fear.

This body is not me. These eyes are not me. I am not caught by these eyes. So if you identify yourself with this life span, if you identify yourself with that hate, and if you imagine that you are separated from everything, you are not this, you are wrong, because you are everything at the same time. The wave while living the life of a wave may like to bend down and touch her true nature, the nature of water. All these ideas, beginning, end, high, low, this, that, more or less beautiful, all these ideas can be applied somehow to the wave, but they cannot be applied to water. So wave and all these ideas can be described as the historical dimension and water can be described as the ultimate dimension. And you have your ultimate dimension. Your ultimate dimension is the dimension of no-birth and no-death. Because we cannot talk about water in terms of beginning, end, high, low, like the way you talk about a wave.

Sunyata, emptiness, is a very important term in Buddhism. Very misleading, also. If you look deeply into this sheet of paper, you see that it is full. It is full of everything in the cosmos: the sunshine, the trees, the clouds, the earth, the minerals, everything. Except for one thing. It is empty of one thing only—a separate self. The sheet of paper cannot be by itself alone. It has to inter-be with everything else in the cosmos. That is why the word inter-be can be more helpful than the word to be. To be means to inter-be. The sheet of paper cannot be without sunshine, cannot be without the forest. The sheet of paper has to inter-be with the sunshine, to inter-be with the forest. To be together—that is the real meaning of interdependent co-production.

If you ask how the world comes into existence, into being, the Buddha would say in very simple terms: "This is because that is. This is not because that is not." Because the sunshine is, the sheet of paper is. Because the tree is, the sheet of paper is. You cannot be by yourself, alone. You have to inter-be with everything else in the cosmos. That is the nature of inter-being. I don't think that this word is in the dictionary, but I believe that it will be there soon, because it is helpful to see the real nature of things, the nature of inter-being

Emptiness means the absence of a separate self. If you are locked into the idea of a separate self, you have great fear. But if you look and you are capable of seeing “you” everywhere, you lose that fear. I have practiced as a monk. I have practiced looking deeply every day. I don't just give Dharma talks. I can see me

in my students. I can see me in my ancestors. I can see my continuation everywhere in this moment. I have not been able to go back to my country in the past thirty years. I went out in order to call for peace, to stop the killing, and I was not allowed to go home by many succeeding governments. Yet, I feel that I am there, very real. Many new students of monks and nuns have come up. I have not seen them directly, but they have learned from me through books, tapes, and other disciples who have gone to Vietnam. I don't have that kind of painful feeling of a person being in exile because many friends of mine go to Vietnam and they feel my presence there even stronger than in other countries, including France. I see myself in my students. Every effort I make every day is to transmit the best that I have received from my teachers, from my practice, to my students. That is done with love.

I don't think that I will cease to be someday. I told my friends that the twenty-first century is a hill, a beautiful hill, and we shall be climbing together as a Sangha and I will be with them all the way, true. So for me that is not a problem because I have seen everyone in me, me in everyone. That is the practice of looking deeply, the practice of emptiness, the practice of inter-being.

Anathapindika was learning and practicing these teachings in the last moments of his life. Suddenly, Ánanda saw Anathapindika cry. He felt sorry for the lay person. He said, "Dear friend why are you crying? Did you regret anything? Do you regret anything? Did you fail in your practice?" Anathapindika said, "No, Lord Ánanda, I don't regret anything. I am so happy and I practice so well. It is wonderful to practice with your presence here supporting me. Well, I practice very well." "Why do you cry then?" "I cry because I am so moved. I have been a supporter of the Buddha and the Sangha for more than thirty years, but I have never learned and practiced a teaching that is wonderful like this." He was so happy the last moment of his life. He suddenly got the greatest gift he ever got—no fear. Ánanda said "Dear friend, you don't know, but this kind of teaching, we monks and nuns receive almost every day." Anathapindika said, "Lord Ánanda, I have a request. My last request. Please go home and tell Lord Buddha that although many of us are too busy in our lay life, there are those of us who are capable of receiving and have the time to practice this wonderful teaching. Please tell the Lord to dispense this teaching to us, also, the lay people." Ánanda agreed to do so. And that was the last statement made by the layperson, Anathapindika.

The story you can read in *The Teachings to be Given to the Sick*. I wish that you have the time to take care of this very important practice, the practice of non-fear, the practice of looking deeply to relieve in yourself the deep fear that is always there. If you have non-fear in you, your life will be more beautiful, happier, and you can help many people. Non-fear has an energy as a base for social action, for

actions of compassion, to protect people, to protect the earth, to satisfy your needs to love and to serve. Non-fear is very important.

Omega Institute is a place where we shall be leading a retreat for one thousand people this Fall. I had been there several times. Omega is a place in the northern part of New York state. One day I was going there for a retreat with Sister Chan Khong and a number of friends. We learned that our friend, Alfred Hassler, was dying in a hospital on the way. So we decided to stop and to visit Alfred. He had been a very strong supporter for peace in Vietnam—for ending the war in Vietnam. I came out of Vietnam to call for peace and I made a lot of friends in Europe and in America while working to end the war in Vietnam. Alfred Hassler was one of the friends who strongly supported that effort. He was then director of a peace organization called Fellowship of Reconciliation.

When we arrived in the hospital, he was being fed with serum glucose and he was in a coma. His daughter, Laura, was there. Laura had helped us in the Buddhist Peace Delegation in Paris contacting other peace delegations in the Paris peace talks. And Dorothy, his wife, was there. When they saw us, they were so happy. They did not dream that we could make our way to the place where Alfred was dying.

Laura tried to wake Alfred up, but she could not. Alfred was in a deep coma. I think that the hospital was trying their best to help him. He was in a very difficult state. I decided to ask Sister Chan Khong to sing to Alfred a song I wrote using words from a sutra: "This body is not me. I am not caught by this body. I am life without boundaries. I have never been born. I will never died. Look at me. Look at the stars and the moon. All of them are me, are manifestations of me. So smile to me, take my hand, say goodbye that we will see each other right away after this. We will see each other in every walk of life. We will recognize each other again and again, everywhere." Sister Chan Khong began to sing this song.

After she finished singing for the second time, Alfred came back. He woke up. It was like a miracle. Please don't think that if someone is in a coma, he is not there or she is not there. She is there in a certain way. If you are to accompany a dying person, you have to be there also—to be there body and mind united in mindfulness, solid without fear. And you have to talk to him, to sing to him or to her, because there is a way that person can hear you. This is very true in many circumstances. Don't just sit there. Talk to him. Talk to her. Sing to him. Tell stories. This is my experience. Many people come back, wake up because of that.

Laura was so happy. She said "Alfred." She called her father. “Alfred,” she said, "Do you know that Thay is here? Do you know that Sister Chan Khong is here?" Alfred could not talk, but his eyes proved that he was aware that we were there. Sister Chan Khong began to talk to him, recalling the experiences that we had had working together to stop the war in Vietnam. "Alfred, do you remember that day you were visiting the monk, Tri Quang in Anh Quan? Temple? The United States had just given the order to bomb Hanoi and Thay Tri Quang refused to see any westerners, pacifist or not. He didn't want to see you and you sit outside and you slip in a sheet of paper and you said, 'I will not live until you see me. I will go on a fast?. I am a pacifist. I have come for you, for the people of Vietnam, and not to support the bombing in Hanoi.' And fifteen minutes later, the Venerable opened the door and with a broad smile invited you. Do you remember that, Alfred? "

"Alfred, do you remember the time we organized a peace demonstration in Rome? There were three hundred Catholic priests wearing the names of three hundred Buddhist monks in the jail of Vietnam because these monks refused to be drafted into the army. Remember these things?" In fact, she was doing exactly the things that Shariputra was doing to Anathapindika. Watering the seeds of happiness, because Alfred got a lot of happiness working for peace. When you are able to do something for the cause of your life, you are happy.

During that time, I was doing massage to Alfred's feet. Because when you die, you may get a little bit numb and you don't have the feeling that your body is there. So it is very helpful to massage him or her. "Alfred do you know that Thay is massaging your feet?" And Alfred, although he could not say anything, his eyes proved that he was aware. We continued like that for five, seven minutes. And suddenly, suddenly, Alfred opened his mouth and pronounced a word. "Wonderful. Wonderful." Two times. And after that he sank back into a coma. We waited for a half hour or more and we have to go to the retreat in Omega.

Before leaving, I told Dorothy, his wife, and Laura, his daughter, to continue the practice—talking to him, singing to him, evoking the good memories. I had to give an orientation talk that night. Early in the morning, I got the news that Alfred passed away just a few hours after we left, peacefully, without pain. It's wonderful to have friends who understand you and support you in this difficult moment. It's wonderful to be able to be there for your friend in this very difficult moment, but you have to cultivate so that you'll be solid, you'll be without fear. Because that is the best way that you can help the other person.

This teaching of the Buddha about non-fear, about no-birth and no-death is the cream of the whole body of the teaching. You have come to Plum Village in order

to learn techniques to get more solidity, to transform some of your sufferings. Yes, that is good, but don't miss the opportunity. This is a kind of invitation for you to go deeper, to learn, and to practice so that you become someone who has a great capacity for being solid, calm, without fear, because our society needs people like you who have these qualities. And your children, our children, need people like this in order to go on.

It's forty-four minutes after noon. So we shall have a walking meditation after this. After fifteen minutes of break, we will have a formal lunch a little bit late today. Everyone is invited to the formal lunch. This is to show you how they practice in Buddhist monasteries during retreat. We make the ritual very short—reduce it to the minimum—for you to have a taste. It may be a great joy to participate in such a meal. You see the monks and nuns in their orange robes, holding their bowls. Please participate in all the lunch. We will eat in such a way that peace, joy, and stability will be possible during the time of eating. It is a real practice. From the time you hold the bowl and look into the bowl, you begin already to practice. When you fill the bowl with the food, you also practice mindful breathing. There are many gatas, short poems, for you to breathe along with so that you dwell in mindfulness. You just look at the brothers and sisters, the monastic people and the Tiep Hien people in order to see how they do it. Because the practice is to be mindful in every moment. When you have gotten your food, you practice walking meditation to this hall and you sit down .You place the bowl or the plate in front of you and you begin to practice sitting meditation. Not waiting. Waiting is not a practice.

Enjoy your sitting. Enjoy your breathing. Enjoy the collective energy of the Sangha. The monks and the nuns have wooden spoons so that they can eat very, very quietly without producing any noise. Unfortunately we don't have wooden spoons for everyone, so do your best not to produce noise and you will feel the atmosphere of the monastery. Every movement of your spoon, of your fork, should be mindful. You chew your food slowly and you become aware of what you are eating. During the meal, become aware of the food. Each morsel of food is an ambassador coming from the whole cosmos just like the sheet of paper. Chew thirty times and be aware of what you are chewing. Don't chew your sorrow, your projects, your worries—just enjoy the food and pay attention also to the community of brothers and sisters around you. Just two objects of your mindfulness: the food and the community of practice.

There will be some chanting—not too much. The monks and nuns, they have their traditional bowls. They will hold the bowl with this mudra. Two fingers to support the bowl and three fingers to keep it from falling. Like this. And with the other hand, they practice the mudra of peace. They hold the bowl like this and

they chant and offer the food to all the Buddhas in the cosmos, all the *bodhisattvas* in the present moment who are everywhere in the world trying to relieve suffering. During that time, their spoon is stuck into the food with the concave face outward.

Then after the chanting, I think about two minutes or less, there will be an offering to share the food with other living beings. This is a symbol. A small quantity of food will be put in a small bowl like this with water. Then everyone will do the concentration in order to touch all living beings who need the food to survive. We pour our compassion, our understanding, into the food. Then one novice will go to a window and chant a gata of four lines inviting all living beings to come and receive the food. That is to nourish the compassion in us. The tradition began at the time of the Buddha. Every time they ate, they always put aside a little bit of their food to share with the animals and the insects around them.

Then we will practice the five contemplations. We enjoy our meal silently and mindfully and you will feel the spirit of fellowship, sisterhood, while of eating. So please join us, especially those of you who have not had this experience. This will be very rewarding.